

September 10, 2015

PUBLIC SAFETY/JUSTICE FACILITY COMMITTEE REPORT

A Public Safety/Justice Facility Committee meeting was held on Monday, September 10, 2015 at 6:00 p.m. in the Quorum Court Room, County Administration Building, Third Floor, 215 East Central Avenue, Bentonville, Arkansas

Committee Members Present: Jones, Adams, Allen, Leadabrand, Anglin, Shadlow, Moehring

Others Present: JP Meyers, County Judge Robert Clinard, Benton County Sheriff's Office Chief Richard Connor, Major Shawn Holloway, Administrator of Public Safety Marshal Watson

Media: Tom Sissom

JP Jones called the meeting to order at 6:00 p.m.

Public Comments

None

AWIN (Arkansas Wireless Information Network)

JP Jones explained that the Arkansas Wireless Information Network (AWIN) is a state system. It has to do, in general, with public safety, law enforcement, firefighters, first responders, public works, and emergency management (statewide and local) and it would replace the current analog radio system. The analog system is becoming an issue to the large volume of users, especially law enforcement. This would be a multi-year deal so it will be discussed during the Public Safety meeting and then forwarded on to the Finance and Budget Committees.

Administrator of Public Safety Marshal Watson gave a presentation on AWIN. He began by explaining that, in late July, the state hosted a meeting in Springdale with all of the major partners (the counties and the major cities in the two-county area) that would participate in a partnership to further utilize and expand the AWIN system. He explained that, in the system currently in place, the architecture itself is approximately fifteen to twenty years old, with most of the components being over ten years old. The concern is that, not only has this technology been in Benton County for a considerable amount of time, but the aging of the equipment will eventually become an issue as well. He explained that this issue has been brought up several times in recent years. He then illustrated the current technology in place by showing a graphic of a conventional repeater to the committee. He explained that a conventional repeater receives an audio transmission, be it from law enforcement, fire, EMS, road department or public works, on an input frequency; it then rebroadcasts this transmission on a second frequency on which all the other subscriber units (i.e. radios) receive the communication. Typically these are put on top of

buildings, mountain tops or towers to provide enhanced coverage for the units out in the field. These conventional repeaters make up a conventional system. Benton County currently has thirteen repeaters operating in nine sites. They are in strategic locations to provide coverage for emergency management, fire services, or law enforcement who utilize the county radio system. In a conventional system, the repeater may be idle 90% of the time. This is a very inefficient use of that bandwidth. Everyone has their own system. For example, Firenet supports fire and EMS in Benton County. It comprises four sites and, if any of them are not being used, then they are idle. The Sheriff's Office is the same way; they have five sites and if these frequencies are not being used, they are just lying in wait. This system is not only inefficient; it does not allow them to manage the traffic as well as other systems, because they are isolated to the repeater within range. If they are in range to the repeater, they are obligated to use it, as opposed to another repeater and so they may not hear the other units in the field.

Marshal Watson stated that in the future, they would like to switch to a trunked system. In general, trunking systems are beneficial because they don't have channels; they have talk groups. As far as utilizing the radio, the subscriber does not know the difference between a talk group and a channel. The repeaters are all controlled by a single controller, which assigns a channel when a unit wants to key up and talk on the radio. In this case, one of those channels (Channel 1) is a controller channel. When each radio is turned on, it references with a control channel, which commands and controls the radio. So, if a law enforcement officer is talking on a channel, all the other officers in the talk group can hear that individual. That repeater is not dedicated to law enforcement. In ten minutes, another department can call up and be assigned a channel but the system knows that this person will be on a different talk group and therefore it assigns that channel so they can communicate. By use of a trunking system, they can allow more subscriber units to utilize a smaller number of channels because any one of those channels could be assigned to them and they could utilize it at any time, as opposed to a conventional repeater that is dormant while waiting for a dedicated resource (i.e. fire, law enforcement, EMS) to utilize it.

JP K. Harrison stated that currently, if there are two Sheriff's units on the very same channel, they have to wait until the other one stops talking. He asked if it would be the same way with the new system.

Marshal Watson said it will be the same way. If the two units are on the same talk group, they will still have to wait in line to run the tags, run the VIN or conduct a traffic stop within their organization as assigned on the radio.

JP Adams said that with the current system, if there is an emergency requiring fire, EMS or law enforcement, in the East side of the county, the tower is 'net direct' and locked out to everyone except those dealing with that specific incident.

Marshal Watson stated that his staff has not gotten to the point of looking at the specific programming. The system will have alternate channels for it to go to. He said that right now they identify it as “net direct” and no one else keys up. He then explained “net direct” to the committee. When any law enforcement agency goes out on a high priority call, they will net direct, which means that all non-related traffic will be held at that point in time to keep the radio channel readily available for units to ask for help or to provide commands. The new system will allow additional channels to which to send the other traffic. The current system does not support an emergency function, and the majority of trunking systems include an emergency option. All the radios have a bright yellow or red button that someone can push if they get into trouble and it will relay that emergency activation to the dispatch center and tell them what unit has activated their emergency button. They can also have a “man down” switch where the radio can trigger an alert if the radio is in a sideways position or is immobile for a long time. These are all things that are possible with this new system.

JP Jones asked if multiple users can key into the same frequency and end up talking over each other.

Marshal Watson said that this true and, when multiple units attempt to speak, they can drown each other out. He explained that with a trunk system, the handoff from the control channel of assigning a channel takes place on a one-on-one basis with each user. When the unit on the field keys up the radio, they are going to be assigned to a channel. If their talk group is already busied out with a user on it, the system will ‘bonk’ them (this word refers to the sound the system makes) to tell them that the channel is currently utilized. It will also give them an audible cue when the channel becomes available again. This ensures that no one talks when someone else is already on the system. The only possible exceptions to this would be in an emergency when the emergency button has been keyed or if CenCom has high priority information that needs to be transmitted; there are priority settings where different users can have different priority levels on the system.

JP Anglin inquired as to the financial impact this would have on the smaller cities.

Marshal Watson stated that anyone who utilizes CenCom will need to switch to this system, and this would definitely be a multi-year deployment. They are going to want to give the smaller cities and the rural fire departments plenty of time to prepare. He said that some of the rural fire departments got their subscriber units updated about ten years ago through the utilization of a Homeland Security Grant. There will be a cost involved and the agencies that work with them know that something is coming, as they have been talking about it for several years. However, there are a lot of conversations and partnerships that need to be worked on before they can effectively make the transition.

JP Shadlow asked about how this will affect the people who have home units (scanners).

Marshal Watson said a P25 digital system is quite a technological leap from the current equipment. Right now, a person can buy a \$100 scanner and they can get on the network. The current system provides very limited security. The new system is much more expensive and there are more security functions to limit public access to the network, which is better for law enforcement security.

JP Leadabrand asked what they are asking the committee to do at this point.

Marshal Watson, in answer to the question, continued on with the presentation. He stated that the state system is not only a trunking system but it is a Project 25 system. He explained that Project 25 was developed as a partnership between many organizations, the chief organization being the Association of Public Safety Communication Officials. Project 25 has been deemed the standard for public safety in the United States and it is being adopted worldwide. The organization that started this came together in 1989 and started a wish list for what they wanted to see in a radio system. This led to the P25 system. This P25 system has been around for a long time, it has been readily adopted, it is the standard for public safety, and, furthermore, the Federal Government will only procure P25 equipment now. If Federal funds are being utilized, P25 radios must be purchased. The P25 standard was driven by public safety professionals that got together and determined what they wanted in a system. P25 drives interoperability which is the ability for responders to talk to other responders. As long as someone has a P25 radio, they can speak to anyone else who has a P25 radio. This helps Benton County as a region. If they do it and other areas do it, they will be interoperable. This could eventually expand into inter-state systems. Also, any vendor who wants to open up shop and create a P25 radio can do so; P25 is an open source vendor.

JP Meyers asked if the P25 system can communicate with the current system.

Marshal Watson said that he would answer that question later on in the presentation. He then went on to explain the secure communications portion of the presentation. What this entails is, in order for the subscriber to utilize this system, there is a key code specific to that radio that must be registered. The P25 system going digital makes it difficult for scanners to get information and there are encrypted data packets from one subscriber to another. He stated that planning for the AWIN system started in 2003. This was a brainchild of Governor Mike Huckabee, who wanted Arkansas to take the lead on this to come up with a better solution. The P25 system came online in 2006. The system consists of over 2,700 subscriber units and there are currently over 100 tower units throughout Arkansas. This system is monitored 24/7, 365 days a year by an operation center in Little Rock. If there are any issues, they respond immediately. The system has a value of approximately \$200 million. The county is currently a

user on the system. The capacity that most counties have on the system currently is ‘command and control.’ The major cities in Benton County all have access to the system. Most state agencies are on the system. Every county in the state is a user of the system in some capacity. This system is also utilized state wide for TraumaCom which is the command center that tells the ambulances where they should take a trauma patient based on their signs and symptoms.

JP Moehring asked if ambulances have the ability to be on the system right now, anywhere, with TraumaCom.

Marshal Watson said that any ambulance in the state of Arkansas has to have a TraumaCom radio installed in it. If there is a real trauma, the patient is triaged and the information is reported to TraumaCom. TraumaCom then tells them which hospital to transport the patient to, based on the patient’s needs. He explained that the coverage will greatly improve in Benton County by using this system. With an analog system, the signal drops up more quickly and sharply than a digital system. A digital system will hold that connection to the tower site longer and better than an analog system does up until the point when it’s gone, it’s gone.

JP K. Harrison asked if, at some point, the Feds are going to say that everyone has to get off the analog system.

Marshal Watson said he is not familiar with that but there is no question that the trend is to go digital. In 2013, there was a mandate to go narrow band. They went from a 25-split to a 12-split to free up bandwidth. To his knowledge, there is no Federal mandate to go digital but everyone who can is going digital. The state believes there is a buy-in of approximately \$2.1 million into the system. This is for Northwest Arkansas as a region, not specifically Benton County. The state is prepared to provide the majority of the money but there are a few items that they perceive they do not have the funds to provide and that will total \$1.2 million. Currently, there is one AWIN site in Benton County located near Vaughn, but one site is not enough. The state will come in and install four more sites in Benton County, one in each quadrant. This would bring it up to five sites in Benton County and they will install an additional site in Washington County, as well. These sites will not only be for Benton County, anyone on the AWIN system could use them. The system itself is very robust and provides great coverage. He proposed that they could get a conceptual nod from the court that this is, at least in theory, something that could be beneficial and something to follow up on. In future weeks, Motorola will be here to do the site surveys and determine the equipment list and what the cost would be. At that point, they hope to meet with the county and municipality leaderships to find out what the county’s share might be. There is a lot of conversation needed to get all of the questions answered but the goal is to give all the agencies plenty of time to prepare.

JP Allen stated that, when they met previously, everyone did not buy into it. He is concerned that this will hurt the concept of everyone sharing the network. He asked if there has been any progress in convincing a particular group who was previously uninterested in adopting this system.

Marshal Watson said that they have not met with any stakeholders yet because they want to get the financial aspect worked out first. The fact is Benton County will need to do something, regardless of what other providers decide to do.

Major Shawn Holloway said that there has been some discussion with some of the bigger cities. They need more data. One of the other cities already has a different digital system, but the City of Rogers is considering this system.

JP K. Harrison asked if they had this system and the dispatch went down, could this system be used for another provider to help out with the dispatch.

Marshal Watson said that they have this ability already. In order to add the extra four sites and have Benton County have their own P25 system, the price would be about \$9-12 million. They looked at some other options that would suit their needs but they would be isolating and would not put them where they wanted to be in ten years, these were about \$3 million. They could purchase their subscriber units to go onto the P25 system for somewhere around \$3 million. The P25 unit life expectancy is about ten to fifteen years. The current units they are using have a life expectancy of about five years. According to the AWIN Department of Information Systems, the county will not pay any subscribers costs or any future enhancements of the systems. As long as new units are purchased every ten to fifteen years, they will take care of the structure and everything else.

JP Moehring asked if the cost figure is just for Benton County and which department it is specifically for.

Marshal Watson said it is a ballpark number and it takes care of the Sheriff's office, emergency management, fire services, all the radios in CenCom, all the radios in the road department and that also takes into account procuring on a one-to-one basis, all the radios purchased for the fire service around 2004-2006. There are some finite details to work out, related to the number of subscriber units needed. The only work to be had would be what it would take to go into CenCom and rework some of the equipment to be compatible with this system.

JP Moehring asked if any other entities in Benton County have signed up for this yet.

Marshal Watson stated that everyone is sort of waiting to see what everyone else is going to do. The \$1.2 million number is for Washington and Benton County and this number would go down, depending on how many entities decide to participate.

JP Moehring inquired about the price and if there are differences in the models of subscriber units.

Marshal Watson stated that they are looking at about \$1,500 per subscriber unit. Currently, they pay less than \$700 for a subscriber unit, but they don't last as long as the new ones would.

JP Moehring asked if it is fair to say that the ability of some of the smaller departments to go forward with this is dependent upon the larger departments in the area moving forward with it and if this expense could come out of the Communications Fund.

Marshal Watson said yes and that he would lump Benton and Washington Counties into that. He also said that this can come out of next year's Communication Fund. Several years ago, there was anticipation that the \$500,000 that was moved to General Fund would be used for upgrading the communication system.

JP Shadlow asked what happens if one of the municipalities chooses not to do it.

Marshal Watson replied that ultimately they would not get dispatch if they were not on the system. The entities that are dispatched by Benton County will have to do what Benton County does or make other arrangements. One of the communication sites identified for this project is the Whitney Mountain site – the only site that the county owns. There is a 99-year lease on that site. When that site was put up in the mid-1990s, it was done cheaply. It is neither tall enough nor robust enough, and they would like to budget monies in 2015 to replace that site with a commercial site capable of handling the capacity of equipment and able to provide better coverage. Regardless of whether the AWIN system is adopted or not, if the new site was up there today, they would see better function and better performance of the existing equipment. They think this would be a good time to budget for it. He sees the equipment being installed in the 2016 calendar year and the county migrating to the system somewhere in 2017.

JP Anglin asked if there has been any of this discussion in the inter-governmental meetings and it was determined that there has not. She stated that it would be a good idea to give this information to the mayors of the area cities so they can begin to plan for this change.

JP Allen stated that he is a strong supporter of this idea. He feels that the timing is right and the need is definitely there. He inquired as to the goal of the night's presentation.

JP Jones answered that the goal for tonight would be to get a yes or a no on moving forward with the AWIN system in more detail. He would recommend a motion to get the numbers and then, with a recommendation from the Public Safety committee, send it to the Budget Committee. This was discussed.

Marshal Watson stated that the tower site would cost \$350,000, which would be turnkey for that site. This is the only site that the county owns, maintains, and operates and it would be a great asset to go ahead and upgrade that site.

JP Jones clarified that the county would not have any other costs associated with the other AWIN sites, other than the buy-in amount.

Marshal Watson said that is true. The state owns a portion of their infrastructure and they lease the other portion from a communications or tower company.

Major Shawn Holloway stated that at some point five or six years down the road, they are going to have to spend a lot of money when the equipment starts going down. He feels that it would be a mistake to not take advantage of the offer they have now.

JP Allen made a motion to forward this proposal to the Budget Committee, JP Shadlow seconded.

JP Leadabrand voiced his disagreement in this proposal. He does not like the potential interconnectivity throughout the counties, states and maybe even the nation as he feels this is intimidating. However, he recognizes that if they don't get into the system, then the smaller areas will be left out. He feels that there are too many County projects going right now (i.e. the courthouse, jail, EMS, etc.); he wants to make sure there is enough money for the existing projects and so he will be voting no.

JP Moehring clarified that this motion is for \$350,000 for the 2016 budget for the Whitney Mountain Site only and that anything additional will require subsequent meetings.

JP Allen reminded everyone that the Public Safety Committee does not weigh finances. They are only supposed to determine if this is something they are interested in implementing and then forward it to the Budget Committee, where the financial discussions can take place.

JP K. Harrison said that the main thing is that the need has been shown and now it is up to the Finance Committee to determine if the county can afford it.

JP Adams supports rebuilding the Whitney Mountain tower site. He likes the P25 system and how it can be slowly phased in so it doesn't cost so much all at once. He feels this tower upgrade is important for the safety of the employees as well as the citizens of Benton County.

Motion passed by show of hands vote: 6 for, 1 against (Leadabrand)

JP Jones discussed an opportunity to improve the security of the buildings. They need to add a second deputy to a building. The elected officials have said they will work as they already do to provide security for the buildings, and they believe they have enough in the budget to put a second deputy in place for this year.

JP Allen stated that, if it needs to be done this year, it needs to go to the Finance Committee. If it is for 2016, it will go to the Budget Committee.

Major Nathan Atchison said he wants this as soon as possible.

JP K. Harrison stated he will support it 100%.

JP Jones would like to do it before the next Finance Committee meeting in order to get the deputy position posted.

JP Allen asked when this would be implemented.

Major Atchison said they could potentially get the position filled by the end of next week. The Committee voted unanimously to discuss it at the next Finance Committee meeting.

County Judge Robert Clinard said that no Intergovernmental Cooperation Council was held last spring, but one will be held this upcoming fall and the potential communication system upgrade will be a part of the discussion.

Judge Clinard stated that a meeting was held with the architects about the jail addition and everything went well.

Meeting adjourned at 7:28pm.